

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-16

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-07 H-03 INR-11 L-03

NSAE-00 NSC-07 PA-04 RSC-01 PRS-01 SP-03 SS-20

USIA-15 AID-20 COME-00 EB-11 FRB-03 TRSE-00 XMB-07

OPIC-12 CIEP-03 LAB-06 SIL-01 OMB-01 AGR-20 IO-14

IGA-02 SR-02 ORM-03 DRC-01 /198 W

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R 251005Z SEP 74

FM AMEMBASSY DACCA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4381

INFO AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD

AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI

CINCPAC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 DACCA 4337

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: EAID, SWEL, BG, PINT, PIC

SUBJECT: FEAR OF FAMINE

SUMMARY: BECAUSE OF "NEAR FAMINE CONDITIONS," GOVERNMENT HAS ANNOUNCED PLANS TO OPEN BREAD AND GRUEL KITCHENS IN ALL 4,300 UNIONS OF BANGLADESH. THE DESTITUTE ARE DYING OF STARVATION AND MANY HAVE COME TO DACCA AND OTHER CITIES SEEKING HELP. THE POLITICALLY VOLATILE, HOWEVER, ARE NOT THE STARVING BUT THE WORKING AND MIDDLE CLASSES WHOSE ANGER IS INCREASING AS RICE AND OTHER FOOD PRICES ESCALATE AND STOCKS REMAIN LOW. END SUMMARY.

1. ON HIS DEPAULURE FOR NEW YORK SEPTEMBER 23, MUJIB TOLD PRESS THAT "NEAR FAMINE CONDITIONS" EXIST THROUGHTOUT THE COUNTRY AND THE PEOPLE ARE FACING STARVATION. HE HAS ORDERED THE OPENING OF GRUEL KITCHENS IN ALL 4,300 UNIONS
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OF BANGLADESH BY SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 29. THE PRIME MINISTER ALSO SAID THAT HE TOLD THE HOME MINISTER TO DEAL SEVERELY WITH BLACK MARKETEERS, HOARDERS AND OTHER ANTISOCIAL ELEMENTS WHO ARE TRADING OFF THE MISERY OF THE PEOPLE.

2. IN FOLLOWUP PRESS INTERVIEW, RELIEF AND REHABILITATION MINISTER ABDUL MOMIN SAID THAT BDG HOPED TO FEED 2.6 MILLION PEOPLE DAILY AT THE KITCHENS WHICH WOULD REMAIN OPEN UNTIL MID-NOVEMBER WHEN THE NEW CROP HARVEST WAS EXPECTED. IN EACH UNION, MOMIN SAID, TWO MAUNDS (ONE MAUND EQUALS 82.3 LBS.) OF ATTA (WHEAT FLOUR) WILL BE SUPPLIED INITIALLY TO MAKE BREAD FOR DISTRIBUTION TO A MINIMUM OF 600 PEOPLE. THIS BREAD PROGRAM IS REPORTED TO REQUIRE 300,000 MAUNDS OF WHEAT (11,000 METRIC TONS) A MONTH. IN THE SECOND MONTH OF OPERATION, MOMIN SAID HE HOPES THAT RICE CAN BE SUPPLIED TO PREPARE GRUEL. WORK RELIEF AND OTHER FREE DISTRIBUTION OF XEOD WILL CONTINUE, HE ADDED, SO THAT THE TOTAL NUMBER OF PEOPLE BEING HELPED MAY REACH 10 MILLION. MOMIN ALSO SAID THAT IN DACCA HE HAS ALREADY SANCTIONED 1,500 MAUNDS OF WHEAT AND 25,000 TAKA IN CASH FOR ITS DISTRIBUTION TO THE DESTITUTE.

3. MOMIN ALSO SPOKE ABOUT FOODGRAIN PRICES WHICH JUMPED DRASTICALLY OVER THE PAST WEEKEND, WITH RICE SELLING FOR 9 TAKA AND HIGHER A SEER (KILO) (TAKA 360 PER MAUND) AND SUPPLIES DISAPPEARING FROM THE MARKETS. THE RELIEF MINISTER BLAMED THE PRICE RISE ON SOME UNSCRUPULOUS TRADERS AND SAID THAT HE HAD MET WITH TRADERS AND ASKED THEM TO BRING THE PRICES DOWN TO A REASONABLE LEVEL, WHICH HE DEFINED AS 180 TAKA PER MAUND. BDG HAS ALSO LIFTED THE BAN ON RICE MOVEMENT WITHIN THE COUNTRY, HE SAID, WHICH SHOULD RESULT IN A PRICE DROP AS GRAIN MOVES FROM SURPLUS TO DEFICIT AREAS. MOMIN WARNED, HOWEVER, THAT IF PRICE AND SUPPLY CONDITIONS DID NOT IMPROVE BY SEPTEMBER 28, DRASTIC ACTION WILL BE TAKEN AGAINST HOARDERS. MOMIN DESCRIBED THE FOOD STOCKS AS "TOLERABLE," STATING THAT 5,500 TONS OF PAKISTANI RICE HAD ARRIVED AND 50,000 TONS WERE EXPECTED SOON FROM THE UNITED STATES.

4. COMMENT: THERE IS A VERY CLEAR NEED FOR FREE DISTRIBUTION OF FOOD, EVEN THOUGH UNDER THIS SCHEME THE PER
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CAPITA AVAILABILITY AND TOTAL AMOUNT OF FOOD IS VERY SMALL IN PROPORTION TO NEED. TWO MAUNDS OF ATTA FOR 600 PEOPLE COMES OUT TO ABOUT ONE QUARTER POUND PER CAPITA TO FEED ABOUT THREE PERCENT OF THE AVERAGE UNION POPULATION. THE AMOUNT OF GRAIN NEEDED FOR THIS BREAD PROJECT IS REALISTIC GIVEN SUPPLIES. THE 11,000 METRIC TONS REQUIRED FOR A MONTH IS ABOUT TWO OR THREE TIMES PRE-FLOOD FREE RELIEF LEVELS, AND WILL BE MET BY DRAWING DOWN OFFTAKES FOR MODIFIED RATIONEES. HOWEVER, THERE ARE QUESTION ABOUT THE FEASIBILITY OF THE SCHEME. THE MAJOR ONE IS WHETHER OR NOT THE GOVERNMENT HAS THE CAPACITY TO MOBILIZE THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE KITCHENS, NOT SIMPLY TO DISTRIBUTE RAW GRAIN, BUT TO MILL THE ATTA

AND BAKE THE BREAD. FURTHERMORE, PUTTING KITCHENS EQUALLY INTO EACH UNION IS OBVIOUSLY A POLITICAL DECISION, NOT ONE BASED ON ESTIMATE OF AREAS OF GREATEST NEED. WHILE WE DO NOT DOUBT THAT EACH UNION HAS AT LEAST 600 HUNGRY PEOPLE

TO FEED, ESPECIALLY IN DISTRICTS WHERE DEVASTATION WAS GREATEST, WE QUESTION WHETHER OFFICIALS WILL BE ABLE TO CUT OF THE RELIEF LINES AT THAT FIGURE. UNION OFFICIALS WILL LIKELY WIND UP PASSING OUT NEGLIGIBLE MORSELS OF BREAD TO MANY MORE SUPPLICANTS. AND FINALLY, IT STRIKES US AS MOST UNLIKELY THAT THE GOVERNMENT WILL, IN FACT, USE SCARCE RICE LATER TO PROVIDE GRUEL FREE TO THE STARVING, ESPECIALLY IF CRITICISM OF HIGH PRICES AND SHORTAGES CONTINUES TO RISE AMONG WAGE AND SALARY EARNERS. AT LEAST ONE FOOD MINISTRY OFFICIAL HAS ALREADY IMPLIED TO US THAT RICE WILL NOT BE SUPPLIED FOR GRUEL.

5. POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS. THAT THE GOVERNMENT HAS REACTED THIS RAPIDLY IN ATTEMPTING TO SET UP A MASS FEEDING PROGRAM IS A CLEAR INDICATION OF THEIR REAL CONCERN. SOME PEOPLE ARE, IN FACT, DYING OF HUNGER IN DACCA AND ELSEWHERE THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY. THE VERY POOREST ARE COMING INTO THE CAPITAL CITY AND ARE UNABLE TO BEG ENOUGH FOOD OR MONEY TO STAY ALIVE; THE NUMBER WHO DIE ON THE PAVEMENTS IS INCREASING. THE GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN ROUNDING UP THE DESTITUTE PERIODICALLY FROM THE

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CINCPAC FOR POLAD

RAILWAY STATION AND OTHER GATHERING SPOTS AND TAKING THEM TO CAMPS ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF DACCA, BUT OTHER BEGGARS SOON REPLACE THEM. THE STARVING ARE A CONCERN AND AN EMBARRASSMENT TO THE GOVERNMENT, WHICH CAN BE PARTIALLY ALLEVIATED THROUGH THE FEEDING PROGRAM, BUT THESE

EXHAUSTED, LISTLESS PEOPLE ARE NOT A POLITICAL THREAT. OPPOSITION EFFORTS TO MOBILIZE THEM CONTINUE TO BE FUTILE.

6. THE POLITICALLY VOLATILE ARE THE WORKING AND MIDDLE CLASSES OUTRAGED BY RISING PRICE OF RICE AND OTHER FOODS. THE PRICE JUMP THIS WEEKEND WAS MET WITH ALMOST UNIVERSAL ANGER BY PEOPLE WHO CAN FORESEE THEIR FAMILIES GOING HUNGRY, NOT FROM LACK OF FOOD BUT FROM THEIR INABILITY TO BUY ENOUGH AT CURRENT PRICES. REPORTEDLY ONE RATION SHOP WAS LOOTED THE OTHER NIGHT AND THERE HAVE BEEN ALTERCATIONS AT OTHER SHOPS IN BOTH DACCA AND THE
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COUNTRYSIDE. FOOD STOCKS ARE IN SHORT SUPPLY IN DACCA FOR AT LEAST SEVERAL REASONS: THE SUPPLY ITSELF IS BELOW NORMAL LEVELS OBTAINING AT THIS TIME OF YEAR; SOME MERCHANTS ARE HOARDING TO DRIVE THE PRICE UP FURTHER; OTHERS MAY FEAR THAT LARGE STOCKS WILL MAKE THEM A TARGET FOR LOOTERS. MERCHANTS ARE NOW SELLING ONLY A FEW SEERS TO EACH CUSTOMER. ALTHOUGH THE RELIEF MINISTER THREATENED DRASTIC ACTION TO FORCE DOWN PRICES, EFFORTS EARLIER IN THE MONTH TO USE THE RAKKHI BAHINI TO COMPEL REDUCTIONS FAILED. PRICES CONTINUED TO RISE AS GOODS DISAPPEARED FROM THE SHOPS UNDER RAKKHI BAHINI SURVEILLANCE TO BE SOLD ELSEWHERE.

7. THE ANGER OF THE PEOPLE IS STILL RELATIVELY UNFOCUSED, BUT THERE IS INCREASING EVIDENCE THAT THEY ARE PLACING THE BLAME MORE AND MORE ON ONE MAN, THE PRIME MINISTER. THERE IS WIDESPREAD CONDEMNATION OF HIM. IN AT LEAST ONE DISTRICT UP COUNTRY, THIS IS NOT EXPRESSED AS RESPECTFUL CRITICISM OF "THE BANGABANDU" OR OF "THE SHEIKH" BUT AS BITTERNESS TOWARD "KAMAL'S FATHER," A REFERENCE TO THE PRIME MINISTER'S SON OF UNSAVORY REPUTATION. WHETHER THIS GROWING ATTITUDE OF CONTEMPT EVENTUALLY RESULTS IN POLITICAL ACTION IS THE PRESENT IMPONDERABLE.
BOSTER

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